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ABSTRACT

To examine the effect of placement in freshmen English classes on the way students perceived themselves as writers, a college English instructor conducted an informal comparison of the attitudes of freshman English students with those of tutor-trainees. Both groups of students were asked to write a description of themselves as writers with no directions about content. As expected, the freshman students described themselves as poor writers, giving myriad reasons for their perceived inadequacies--some implying that they must be poor writers because they were in a remedial class. The responses of the tutor-trainees, expected to be positive since being tutor-trainees implied that they were good writers, were also negative. The difference between the two groups was that the tutor-trainees had an understanding of their writing problems, usually self-imposed standards. A posttest at the end of the semester showed that both groups benefited from working together. The freshman students' attitudes about themselves as writers became more positive, and the tutors, by working with less experienced writers, learned to explain concepts they had taken for granted, thereby reinforcing their own skills, and were reassured by the success of their students. (HTH)

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Training the Tutor: A Comparison of Attitudes Toward Writing

In the process of training upper-division college students to tutor in our developmental freshman English composition course, English 100, I wanted to address a problem that most composition teachers, at any level of education, face rather chronically: how to deal with the less-than-enthusiastic student who is frequently also the under-prepared "marginal" student. This is particularly a problem in developmental courses in which class members have been pre-selected, usually with some kind of placement test, and have been, therefore, identified as defiient in some way.

This problem has been the subject of recent attention by members of our profession, and some much needed analysis of the issue is being done as more and more non-traditional students continue their educations and more public attention is focused on the issue of nationwide illiteracy. For example, Richard B. Larsen, in his article "Numbers and Angela" (CE, Jan. 1980) and Bill Linn, in his "Numbers and Angela II" (CE, Jan. 1981) and "Psychological Variants of Success: Four In-Depth Case Studies of Freshmen in a Composition Course" (CE, 1978), discuss various socio-economic and psychological factors that affect a student's attitude toward education. These articles each take a look at the personalities behind the rather grim statistics of falling SAT scores and remedial program drop-out rates. They are valuable, not so much for the specific conclusions they reach, which are

open to interpretation, but for their identification of and attempt to deal with an all-too-often effectively ignored commonplace of the classroom: There are underprepared student in front of us who either will not or cannot meet us halfway in the education process, and their reasons for being in that position are as complex as any sociologist, psychologist, or philosopher could ever wish. Meanwhile, recognizing the massive and seemingly hopeless proportions of the problem, we still must teach the students who are sitting in our classrooms.

Following this reasoning back to my specific concern, training student tutors for developmental English classes, I realized that for us as composition teachers, the problem is complicated by the fact that generally our subject matter and skills have come relatively easily to us; we have had few problems with language acquisition. We are, furthermore, comfortable in the academic world, at home in the classroom. It is not easy for us to understand or to deal with the problems some of our students have with concepts and situations that have given us so little trouble. By virtue of the fact that the tutor-trainees in our program were all education or English majors, I felt that they probably shared with us this common background and that they, too, would need to realize that some students are not so lucky; they don't all necessarily internalize language structures and processes without a struggle. As a result of repeated frustrating confrontations with formal written English, when these students approach a composition course, they are already programmed for failure, and unless this pre-con-

ditioning can be overcome, the students' negative outlooks can become all too frequently self-fulfilling.

Thus at the beginning of the semester, I launched a full-scale, if informal and unscientific, project in which I asked the provisional students in English 100 to write a description of themselves as writers (or as students if they felt more comfortable with that label) and then, separately, I asked the tutors to do the same thing. Because I did not want to bias the results of my study, I gave no directions for content to either group, other than to say that each person should include in his/her paper anything of pertinence to the description. However, in order to establish a basis for comparison, I devised a list of nine items I would look for in each paper. I was interested in whether or not the author of any given paper would mention, for example, a specific past experience or a teacher or grades or grading techniques, and if the author did write about these things, whether or not the comments would be positive or negative. Finally, I decided that since I was trying to locate a "typical" attitude pattern, I would not evaluate any one paper as negative or positive; rather, I would focus on the nine items and determine how many positive or negative or neutral responses I received from each group. In all, I examined approximately one hundred and twenty papers.

Of course, when I began this study, I had preconceived notions of what I would find, and I was at least partially correct. I expected the English 100 students to describe themselves as poor writers or, alternately, poor students, and they did, giving myriad

reasons for their perceived inadequacies. None of them, by the way, said the obvious: "I must be a poor writer/student because you have told me I am by placing me in a remedial course." All of them gave more subjective answers, perhaps adding up to the same thing--that we had told them so--but in a more internalized fashion.

Most students took a direct approach in their descriptions: "When it comes to writing I am the worst." However, sometimes even descriptions that began positively and confidently ended with a shift in meaning. Success, when recognized, was belittled or explained in terms other than personal skill or ability. One such paper came from an art major who began by saying, "I am a good art student;" then went on to add: "As a student in Math I would probably be described or describe myself as dumb. . . . A student of art is a titally different subject all together. By just looking at a picture or an object so much can be learned. . . . It takes no intelligence or deep thought with hours of study to be a student of art." In other words, this student claims that anything he was capable of doing well must be, by definition, inferior. This self-description is, then, a real-life example of the pessimist's clichéd ability to "snatch defeat from the very jaws of victory." As a self-concept, it cannot be helpful in an academic setting where, theoretically at least, the student will be constantly challenged to re-evaluate old ideas and to develop new skills of analysis and communication. Yet this student's attitudes are not unique. Over and over I found variations of them and rationales for them

in a noticable number of the English 100 papers.

For example, as a group the English 100 students mentioned, if not dwelled on, the fact that writing a paper is extremely difficult. The most representative comments were, "I have a hard time thinking of anything to say," and "I just can't get my papers to sound like what's in my head to say." These problems with shaping and polishing an idea, shared to varying degrees, I suspect, by all writers, translated to these students as barriers to good writing: because writing is hard for me, I must not be any good. They expressed no tolerance for the struggle with subject matter or content, and they placed little value on achievement per se and little faith in having done their best. One paper epitomizes this attitude:

> I don't think I am much of a writer. Most of the time I use the wrong words or I just can't seem to understand what I just wrote. I don't care how much thought I put into my work, it just doesn't seem good enough for professional eyes, such as yours. I can read every book that has ever been published on the correct ways of writing and I still will fall flat on my face, or better yet I will just bury myself in the sand. I can understand what the instructor wants me to do and then I will go and do exactly what I think she wants me to do, with the best of my ability and I still crumble.

This student's paper has several strengths. It is organized with

an acceptable topic sentence and support details; it even contains an effective and deliberate authorial voice with a pronounced sense of extended metaphor: "I will fall flat on my face or bury myself in sand," followed later by, "I still crumble." Ironically, almost these same images were used by Shelley in "Ozymandias," but in the student's case, the problem is not overconfidence. The paper contains a self-defeating message: I am no good.

In their papers, the English 100 students frequently pinpointed their specific skills problems. Most of the students even identified their problems by name: subject-verb agreement, vague pronoun reference, fragments, comma splices, run-ons, absent terminal markings, shifted syntax. These papers show the heavy influence of past experience on their authors. Although few of the students referred directly or specifically to either high school or past teachers, the disembodied labels they used so facilely spoke for them. At best, these past encounters with the system had been neutral. The errors, by and large, still cropped up in the papers. The students recognized and identified real problems in their writing, but they had no strategies or techniques for correcting or improving them. In fact, as a group they seemed satisfied with knowing the labels.

Furthermore, these students tended to confine their remarks about specific problems to those concerning grammar and punctuation rules. On the whole, they did not see organization of the paper or development of ideas within the paper as areas of particular concern. Few students mentioned these areas either positively or

negatively, but when they did discuss them, it was in an indirect and basically neutral way: "To be a writer is to be able to express ones self or ones feelings in a very different way. Sometimes it may be hard to think of a subject and yet at other times it is as if ones pen keeps flowing over the paper with sentences that surprise even the writers eyes. . . . I have experienced surprises and frustration. Frustration from having too many ideas running around in my head and then when I finally chose one they all ran together!" This student completely divorces the process of building a paper from the conscious control of the author. Ideas just happen and, therefore, by implication so do successful and unsuccessful papers.

At this point in the study, my general impressions of remedial student attitudes had been supported. In addition, I had learned some particulars that gave me new insights into the students with whom I would be working during the course of the semester: they saw themselves as poor writers; they could give various and technical descriptions of what was wrong with their papers; they saw this state of affairs as a fact of life. Whatever else my reactions to these trends were, I was not surprised.

What I was not prepared for was the response of the tutors to the same assignment; I had expected them to be overwhelmingly positive in their descriptions of themselves as writers. Officially the system--English teachers, academia--had applauded these tutor-trainees and told them repeatedly that they were worthy, capable people. They had been so successful in the system, in fact, that they were planning to join it, either as teachers or as graduate

students. Nevertheless, although a significantly larger percentage of these students chose to define themselves as writers rather than students--thereby showing at least an identification and perhaps a sympathy with writers as a group--their nominally positive self-descriptions were always qualified or limited in some fundamental way; thus, their responses were, to a degree, more negative than I expected them to be. One tutor's comments are representative:

> One important thing I have learned about myself as a writer is that it will never come easily to me. Every time I sit down to write it is an agonizing task. The reason for my agonizing is not that I dislike writing, but that I know before I start what I will require of myself until the paper is completed. I will continue to push myself until I can finally feel a spark of accomplishment, but it will never be the total sense of fulfillment that I continually strive for. . . . In the back of my mind, I never quite accomplish that fulfillment of knowing I've said it better than anyone else could have. I think that is what I keep striving for in my writing--I always try to make it better.

This is not an isolated comment. It is repeated in other papers in very similar words. One element seems to remain constant. The standards being imposed are internal personal ones. These students do not worry about satisfying someone else, for they

know they can easily do so. The real problem is in satisfying themselves.

> How do I see myself as a writer? Whow! That is a loaded question which I have pondered before. Each time the answer has been, sure I can write--as well as the advertisements of today, as well as the newspaper articles, and as well as the children's books.
>
> The problem with that is that these writings do not satisfy me--they are not forms of good writing.

The student continues the process of self-description by defining "good writing" for us: ". . .the writings of our classic literature [which] record a story and simultaneously report the history of that period." This reveals a definite, objective personal goal: to write as the greats of our literary heritage with "devotion to art."

Over and over the same remarks occur in the tutors' papers. "I want to write something that will inspire others." "Books are my passion and it becomes terribly frustrating when one stops to consider how many people have already said it and much, much better than I feel I ever could." It is not an easy task these students have set for themselves.

It is not surprising, therefore, that we hear from these tutors the same statement we heard from the English 100 students: writing is difficult. However, there is a difference. Along with the tutors' admission of the problem is an understanding of it.

> Blank pages frighten me terrifically and as a consequence I have become a procrastinator where my work is concerned. Creative thoughts positively elude me until four hours before a deadline. Then I simply amaze myself with the number of really good ideas I can produce. . . . With a course load of twenty-one hours this semester (and the majority English classes with papers due) my method is going to be pretty tricky business indeed.

This student recognizes the existence of a personal methodology for dealing with writing. She has learned to use deadlines to her benefit, as a spur to creativity rather than a cause for panic. This process, certainly not appropriate for everyone, obviously works well for this student, allowing her to cope successfully with the natural anxieties connected with writing.

Other tutors rely on totally different strategies:

> In order to describe myself as a writer, it will first be necessary for me to analyze the way that I go about writing on a given subject. Each subject given to me as a topic is a challenge, no matter what that particular subject is. I try to develop a thesis statement that can be handled easily and within a limited framework. Once my thesis statement is formed, I then begin to break it down into major areas from which I can make certain points and draw a final conclusion. This is a very organized and effective procedure for me and I follow it very closely on most occasions.

Here again, while the technique is not the same, the recognition of a personal plan for dealing with writing is.

At this point, I began to recognize a fundamental contrast between the self-descriptions of the remedial students and the upper-division ones. The more experienced students have higher expectations of themselves than other people have of them, and, therefore, they frequently express dissatisfaction with their own work. However, they have learned to accept their insecurities as a natural part of the composing process, and they have developed personal ways of dealing with or combating anxiety. They know that recognizing a gap between their accomplishments and their ultimate goals is not necessarily a sign of failure; likewise, they do not confuse a difficult task with an unsuccessful one. The English 100 students, as a group and as individuals, lack this perspective. Perhaps because they lack experience as writers, they do not sense their own control over their writing. They see the typical, necessary stages of grappling with subject matter, rephrasing and changing content, trying new ideas and approaches to a paper as admissions of an inherent inability to write. More seriously, they do not expect much from their papers, either immediately as successful course assignments or ultimately as a means of communicating with their readers. All too often, they describe, and presumably think of, their papers not as clear, logical statements of idea, but as collections of connected misspelled words with occasional sentence structure shifts.

Naturally, at the end of any study of student attitudes, one

hopes to be able to reach useful conclusions that can be applied with universal success to the practical classroom situation. I would like to be able to say that by concentrating on teaching writing as a process and encouraging the remedial students to set higher goals for themselves, the tutors and I were able to bring about dramatic changes in the quality of their writing. I would like to say it because I've always wanted to save the world, but of course I can't.

What I can say, while not as sweeping, still has its own drama. During the course of the semester, the tutors and the English 100 students worked enthusiastically together. On both sides they began to see the personalities behind the stereotypes of remedial student and English teacher. They discussed ideas, exchanged opinions, worked on specific grammar/punctuation problems, revised papers, evaluated each other's work, and shared with each other both the successes and the failures. Each group was able to add a dimension to the other group's conception of what it means to be a person writing.

A post-test, which was a repeat of the original assignment, indicated that by the end of the semester the percentage of English 100 students whose attitudes toward writing and themselves as writers were positive had increased by thirty points. In addition, the students were more enthusiastic about writing, sometimes reworking for their own satisfaction papers that had been officially accepted for the course. One of the students describes this change in attitude:

> When I first came into this class, I thought my writing was average. After receiving my first grade, I found that I was below average. Through the first several weeks my papers suffered. As the weeks went by, I started developing my skills and bettering my ideas on what to write about. I feel my last paper is a 100% improvement over my very first paper. . . . Credit must also be given to the tutor in my group. The past several weeks, she has helped us get the very most out of our papers. . . . Speaking for myself, I can say that my skills and ideas about writing have improved very much.

The tutors apparently benefited equally from their experiences. From the English 100 students they learned just how complex the English language can be, and they recognized in more urgent terms the need for precision in both oral and written communication. They learned to explain concepts they had long ago taken for granted, and because they were dealing personally, face-to-face, with their students, they could tell immediately when their explanations were not clear, as well as when they were. By explaining to others how to shape, write, and revise a paper, the tutors reinforced their own skills. By watching their students succeed, they found reassurance about themselves. The words of one of the tutors not only describe her own experience, but also sum up our general consensus of the semester: "Tutoring remedial English students last semester helped boost my confidence and though I'm still not entirely self-assured, I do feel good about my writing."